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CULTUS: The Church, the family, and the art-saint

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CULTUS: THE CHURCH, THE FAMILY, AND THE ART-SAINT

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Rebekah Carmichael – Author

To my mother, for the wings

ILLUSTRATIONS

CULTUS: THE CHURCH, THE FAMILY, AND THE ART-SAINT

A section of white picket fence leans against the wall at the entrance to the gallery. The boards are weathered, their lower parts disintegrated after years spent buried in the soil. One slat is pushed to the side as if inviting entry. A warm, dim light illuminates the length of fence and the title of the exhibition: *cultus*.

Walking around the wall, you are confronted by the installation. Two large, solid wooden doors stand open at the entrance to an implied space. The doors, standing over seven feet tall, are held upright by thin wires. When viewed from between the doors, the rest of the installation is perfectly centered in your field of vision. Several yards from where you stand, the opposite end of the space is defined by a large altarpiece in three gold-framed panels, each of which measures forty-two by seventy-two inches. Before the altarpiece is an altar, richly decorated in ornate fabrics and topped with icons and boxes containing relics. Ornamented candelabras stand almost five feet high on either side of the altar. A chandelier hangs in the center of the space, and the light from its candles combines with those burning in the candelabras and dim gallery lighting to illuminate a scene reminiscent of a church interior.

Figure 1. Entrance to *cultus* exhibition

Upon approaching the altar, you can observe the icons and relics in greater detail. Framed icons, embellished with gold thread, depict a woman in blue smiling serenely, a man with Jesus-like facial hair in profile, and a young boy in a hospital bed, covered with signs of surgical violence, arm raised. Wooden boxes of various sizes, decorated with gold, contain objects under glass: a collection of patches from a Boy Scout uniform, a pocketknife, men's pajamas, a lock of red hair tied with gold thread, and a number of human teeth.

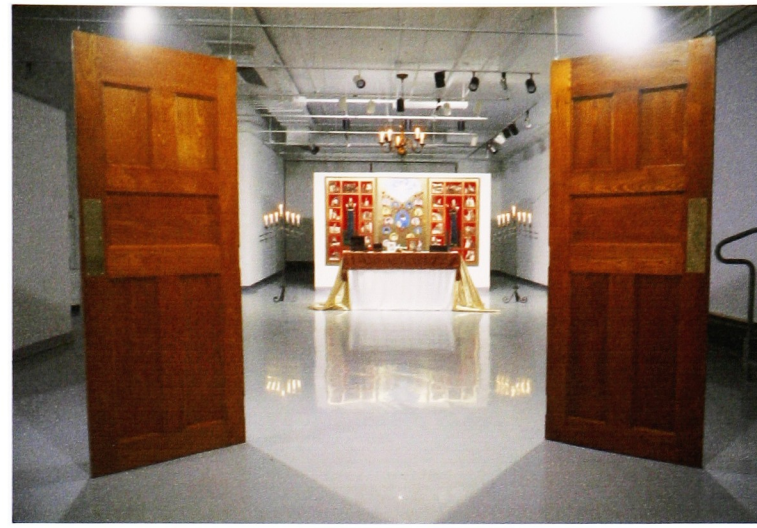

Figure 2. Full view of *cultus* exhibition

Looking up from the altar, you confront the altarpiece. As you move behind the altar for a closer view, you enter the space of the celebrant. Each panel is realized by a combination of solid and printed fabrics, photographs reproduced on

Figure 3. *Cultus* altar and altarpiece

cloth, and painted elements. The center panel is the most ornate. A complex network of vines and roses originate from a house at the bottom of the panel and cover much of its surface. The vines support a number of colored circles containing portraits of individuals. A God-like figure graces the top amid heavenly clouds. The white picket fence returns, running along the lower part of the panel. It visually separates the viewer from the house, though the same slat is askew, creating a point of access. In the center of the panel, the vines and roses hold an oval containing a mother and baby arranged like the Madonna and Child.

The side panels are constructed similarly to one another. Each contains a central figure surrounded by scenes printed on fabric, reproduced from family snapshots. The central figures are assembled from photographic faces and hands printed on fabric and dressed three-dimensionally in saintly robes of opulent fabrics. The figure on the left holds her hands up and open. The figure on the right holds a plate with eyeballs in one hand, and a thumbscrew is twisted onto the thumb of her other hand.

A visitor to the exhibition would be able to experience the desired impression in a general way, but I chose to have an artist statement present in the gallery to provide some context in which to view the work. Throughout the year I spent making *cultus*, I found that the more obsessive, complex, and meticulous the process became, the more those around me became interested in the answer to the question: why on Earth was I doing this?

The historical institutions of Art are tied to the Church, which is linked to the Family. By making art which references its history, depicting the Family-Church relationship, I endeavor to expose the processes by which each of these things relates to

the other. *Cultus* is a visual statement which draws upon this trinity of histories, examining the phenomenon of sacrifice and redefining the sacred. This work illustrates my search for a voice as a woman who makes art in the wake of all of these pasts, attempting to strike a balance between the generally representative and the autobiographical.

Many parallels exist between the Church and the traditional family. We reference them directly in our speech, as we talk of "God the Father," or the Church as the "Family of God." Both the Church and the traditional family are hierarchically structured, with men holding the positions of greatest influence. The Church has even served to define and solidify acceptable roles within the Family. The concept of a marriage as a union sanctioned by God, and the resulting definition of children as "legitimate" or "illegitimate" is an outcropping of Church doctrine and the idea that God defined a gender-specific division of labor (Lerner).

For centuries, the Church was the greatest economic patron in the Western world of what is now considered fine art. Therefore, the study of European art history is, inevitably, largely the study of Christian iconography. Such art, then, presents itself to me as a fitting method to explore the relationship between the Family and the Church by decoding its iconographic styles and symbolic language.

Within the context of family, individuals, often women, who make great personal sacrifice for their families can quite literally give their lives to their spouses and children. Within the parallel framework, the perceived virtue of such an individual becomes saintly, and she becomes as a secular saint. The role of the secular saint has been constructed within the Family as a result of the Family's elemental connection to the

processes of larger social systems. Because social processes are so linked to these systems of representation, I wanted to use the language of those depictions to illustrate the relationship between the women-as-martyrs as essential parts of related hierarchies.

I sought the perfect visual vocabulary to represent the concept of the secular saint as part of this system of histories, so I spent a great deal of time looking through books of icons and other religious art spanning cultures, history, and major religions. Before I began this research, I assumed that the best choices for source material would be Italian and Catholic, particularly because much of my art history background focused on those works.

Raised in a Southern Baptist church, I was taught that Catholicism was a departure from the will of God. Baptists believe that the presence of saints as intermediaries between God and His children is contrary to His plan for a more personal relationship between the human and the divine, and that the depiction of such intermediaries causes one to commit the sin of idolatry. As my beliefs changed, I became more interested in learning about this religion I had been taught to give no credence. The Catholic tradition, in particular, has been illustrated for centuries, creating a rich heritage of representation that pictures members of the Holy Family and a pantheon of saints and other biblical figures.

As my research progressed, however, I found myself drawn aesthetically toward Russian Orthodox iconography. The symbology was so complex, the depiction of hierarchy so rigid, and the style was so ornate and beautiful (particularly that of the Stroganoff school in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) that I began to

consider it seriously on its own merits and in relation to my work. The more I learned about that history, the more it seemed to fit as a way to represent what I was trying to say.

Russia had its beginnings in groups of Slavic tribes in Eastern Europe, agricultural, cattle breeding, hunting people who lived in small settlements and worshipped idols of elements and dead souls, pagan gods, and house spirits. By the eighth century, these people found themselves in a state of external and internal warfare almost constantly, and asked a Varangian (Viking) leader to come and rule their tribes. So began the dynasty of Russian princes. With each tribe worshiping its own idols, the groups were difficult to rule as a unit. When Prince Vladimir came to power in the tenth century, he decided to adopt monotheism as a method for keeping everyone in line. He sent out delegates to search for the monotheistic religion best suited for the task. The ambassadors were most impressed by Byzantine Orthodoxy: the harmony of the details of worship, and the strict, hierarchical system in which it operated. He even married the sister of the Byzantine ruler and was baptized as part of the deal in 988 (Hamilton).

I concluded that because Russian Orthodoxy was developed intentionally to keep the masses in order, the artistic styles it produced could not be a more perfect visual representative of the Church as it pertains to my work. Anyone who has ever been inside an Orthodox church has seen the emphasis that decoration puts on the glorification of sacrifice – the presence of an altar, a cross, and/or images of saints who were martyred in the name of God.

Finding a system of representation was one step in the process of finding my voice. Operating at the open end of art history, I find the concept of art as object incomplete without an appreciation of art as practice(Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in

the Histories of Art: An Introduction"). As an artist, I create work based on my total experience; the place from which I approach artmaking is influenced by my experiences as a woman and an artist in a patriarchal society. This perspective is particularly relevant to work dealing with issues of Church and Family, as women are positioned hierarchically lower than men in both systems and are pictured in the art and lore of each as naturally holding roles which call for the greatest sacrifice. This is a result of complex, interrelated systems by which men have controlled representations of women. I am a woman who is interested in portraying myself and other women, but the art history education I have had offers little in the way of role models for that task. Where are the women making art?

Many theorists have dealt with this question, and the answers are not simple. The universe of art production has and does not exist independently of other social processes. Hierarchical systems also apply to the world of Art in terms of what kind of work is most valued. The line of distinction between "high" and "low" art is almost synonymous with the line distinguishing "art" from "craft", or traditionally male and traditionally female endeavors (Gouma-Peterson). Anthropologically, tasks assigned to women are likely to be categorized as "domestic", while those assigned to men are defined differently. An ethnographer might term the making of pottery "domestic" if it is a woman's activity, but "artistic" if it is done by men. This is indicative of the socially-constructed assumption that not only are tasks naturally gender-specific, men's tasks are more important. This is not because men do more valuable things, but because the things that men do are assigned greater value (Ruth). Additionally, women did not have access to the same subjects and spaces as men for a variety of reasons, and therefore the art that they

produced was different. The nineteenth century Western woman was encouraged to draw because it was quiet and wouldn't disturb anyone, yet would keep her mind occupied and her disposition cheerful. It was a perfect pastime for a woman, as she could pick it up and put it down whenever she was needed (Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"). The men's approach was normalized, canonized, and the artwork produced by women became marginal (Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity").

Is it possible to debunk this qualitative dichotomy without being dismissed? As I developed the ideas which would ultimately lead to the creation of *Cultus*, I found myself leaning further toward the incorporation of craft in my work. I combined skills I have learned throughout my academic career with techniques my mother taught me while ironing my father's shirts, recovering pillows and making my Sunday dresses. It seemed fitting to me that the very things she would do in the service of the family should inform work intended to shed light on the phenomenon of sacrifice.

The woman as artist did not have a lot of room to develop, historically, but woman as model is ubiquitous. Even at the end of the last century, my art history texts presented men primarily as artists and women primarily as subjects without discussing the complex reasons for the practice. It is easy, when looking at works that are presented as exemplars of greatness, to generalize their qualities as defining serious art. The students in my undergraduate program who went on to take the second level photography class considered ourselves to be more "serious" than the beginning photo dabblers, and I remember almost all of us photographing naked women at some point during the course. The men in the class were looking for creative-types who didn't mind shedding their

clothes for the sake of art, and some of them asked the women in the class if they would mind posing. This raised a number of interesting questions about the artist/model dichotomy. Judy Chicago describes similar confusion over reconciling the artist in her with the woman who was supposed to be the model according to what she had observed as a child in the Art Institute of Chicago galleries (Chicago). Nochlin writes that the woman as artist's model is essential to "the very notion of the originary power of the artist, his status as creator of unique and valuable objects, [which] is founded on a discourse of gender difference as power (Nochlin, "Women, Art, and Power")."

As I have read about and looked at art created by women, I have become aware of the problems inherent in the way art history is often taught. If I were to accept the teachings as fact, rather than as a widely adopted point of view, I might believe that men and women were afforded, historically, the same opportunities to become artists, but that women were lacking what Linda Nochlin calls the "golden nugget" of genius that led to greatness (Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"). A course or text often has a section on "women artists," implying that an artist devoid of gender-defining prefix is a man. How strange would it be to lump Rembrandt and Pollock together in a section on "men artists?"

Difference of experience has led to the perception of dichotomous, gender-bound artistic voices, but this is not to imply that there is a typical, female voice with which all women produce art. This type of binary thinking and dualism are antithetical to a postmodern, feminist ideology (Gouma-Peterson).

Artists and art historians who are women have been fundamental in bringing about a self-analysis of art history, one that recognizes it as interconnected with other

social issues (Isaak). Art history did/does not exist in a vacuum. The same methods which have brought about discipleship of a male-normative "genius" shape attitudes and actions in a variety of social systems.

Gender relations are a determining factor in cultural production and signification (Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction"). Therefore, the art which is produced cannot exist separately from the systems by which it is influenced and those on which it impresses. The commoditization of the art object further ensures that all aspects of life are interrelated with art and its production (Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction").

Women who make art are less limited now than we have been in the past, but continue to operate in the shadow of "greatness". Women who make or write about art have taken a number of approaches to dealing with problems, and have identified them and their solutions differently. Third wave feminists, the most recent group to emerge in terms of scholarship, do not see these differences as incompatible, and embrace contradiction as part of modern feminist approaches (Heywood and Drake).

There is a certain amount of indifference to work produced by women and to understanding from where it originates, a different place from where canonized work would emerge. This brings up a problematic paradox, however, as pointing out differences between women's art and the art of other artists causes them to be viewed primarily as women and as artists only secondarily. "Can art transcend special interest? (Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories")."

Feminism, when it asks why we don't know more about women who make/made art, is doing more than simply asking a question about a particular. It "question[s] the fundamental assumptions of the whole enterprise of officially sanctioned knowledge (Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories")."

As products of the culture that produces such sanctioned knowledge, we are ourselves in a difficult position. We are an indoctrinated part of the systems we try to change. There is no fixed reality of "woman", but is it possible to operate outside definitions? We have been shaped and influenced in a way of which it is impossible to be entirely conscious. One cannot operate without doing something she has learned. We do little automatically. Perhaps if women's art is different, it is not so in some categorical way that would suggest a set of shared characteristics. Part of what shapes women as artists in their experience of sexual difference (Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories").

Including women in art history tangentially doesn't solve the problem. The add-women-and-stir approach ignores the real question, as "the criteria of greatness was already male defined (Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction")." "If the artwork that women produce is studied as a side issue it cannot challenge the fundamental dominance of a male worldview (Chicago)."

The separate consideration of women's art is also problematic in the sense that it suggests the existence of a canon of women artists, white women in particular, as a result of the assumption that female parallels to the "great" artists exist (Gouma-Peterson). Of

course, women have existed throughout art's history possessed of great talent and who produced magnificent work. However, handpicking "great" women artists from greater obscurity than their counterparts outlines a subordinate status and ignores drastic differences in opportunity.

In a system that subcategorizes women artists, the women's names we come away with are those who are most sensationalized, such as Artemisia Gentileschi and Frida Kahlo. Though famous, art historical figures who are men are not exempt from having their life stories integrated into their fame, their work is evaluated in terms of genius, with the details of their lives offered as evidence of that genius (Pollock, "The Female Hero and the Making of a Feminist Canon: Artemisia Gentileschi's Representations of Susanna and Judith"). The histories of these famous women eclipse their work, becoming filters through which all of their accomplishments are seen. Their celebrity is so centered in their tragic biographies that they become exceptional. Depicted as living lives of righteous suffering, these women become like art-saints.

Figure 4. Artemesia Gentileschi. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, reprinted from Buchholz, *Women Artists*, 22.

After she was assaulted by her teacher, Artemisia Gentileschi was tortured with a thumbscrew to test the veracity of her story. A popular torture throughout the recorded history of the practice, the thumbscrew was also used on a number of religious martyrs.

It is the story of her rape that also serves to obscure the study of Gentileschi's work. Her

paintings of Judith beheading Holofernes, and others, are often discussed as revenge scenarios, regardless of the fact that bloody subject matter, particularly that involving violence toward women, was en vogue at the time (Pollock, "The Female Hero and the Making of a Feminist Canon: Artemisia Gentileschi's Representations of Susanna and Judith").

Even centuries earlier, painters of the late medieval period studied the skill of "creating wounds whose severity and gruesomeness could… attract the spectator's gaze like powerful magnets (Merback)." Gentileschi's approach to the subject was based on differential experience, but to dismiss it as exclusively the result of her anger is to do a disservice both to the work and to the validity of her vision.

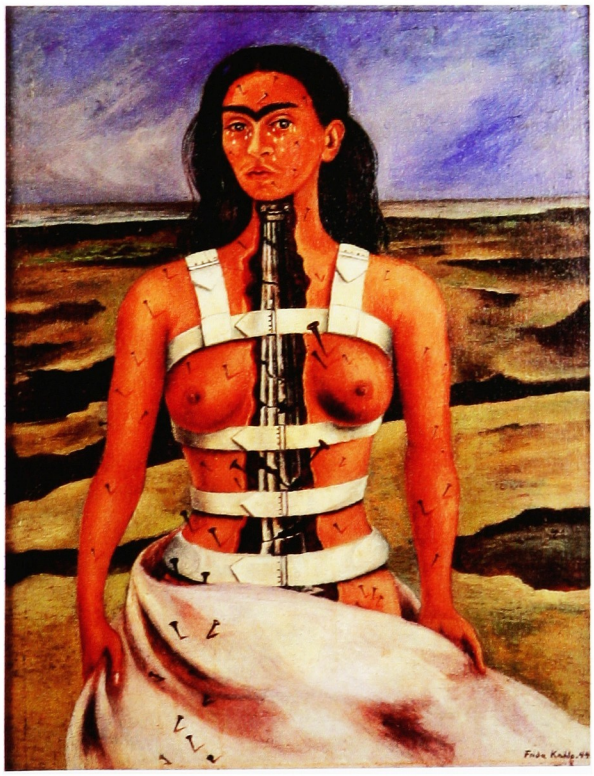

Figure 5. Frida Kahlo. *The Broken Column*, reprinted from *The Art of Frida Kahlo*, 28.

Frida Kahlo is another candidate for canonization as an art-saint. Her exceptional story recently has been made into a movie, and one would not be hard-pressed to locate a section of one of her self-portraits reproduced as a shower curtain. Though Kahlo's work has been discussed as it relates to a variety of cultural, national, and personal themes, the preponderance of interpretations are shaded by her troubled relationship with Diego Rivera and the tragic diseases and accidents that caused her to suffer throughout her life.

Her work, *The Broken Column*, has been interpreted as an assumption of the character of the male saint "thereby reclaiming a condition for women which has been denied a public iconic status" and descriptive of women's suffering in post-Revolutionary Mexico (Kahlo, Art Gallery of South Australia and Art Gallery of Western Australia.).

Though her work can be viewed in a more complex way, more often than not it is interpreted based on the fact that she was sick and Diego was unfaithful. It is telling that she identified with the martyr even as she produced her work.

In her book *Through the Flower*, Judy Chicago describes an event in which students of hers turned against her. Her description of the process by which their gratitude turned to anger displays her sense that she is making sacrifices as the savior of this group of women making art (Chicago).

The methods by which art history is taught identify art-saints, which may influence women who wish to follow in their footsteps to self-canonize. As women who make art, our perceptions of persecution, though valid, may lead us into a martyr's role just as would the oppressive nature of related histories.

This type of Art History 101, to which innumerable college freshman are exposed, ties the origins of "fine art" so inseparably to the Church that religious subject matter becomes thematically dominant. This further outlines the relationship between Family and Church as roles within the Family and larger society are reinforced by depictions of women in religious and religiously themed art.

Representation is not separate from that which it represents. We are all familiar with questions about how television and advertising affect our attitudes and behaviors. Just as advertisers know that a continuous cycle exists between the creation of need and

the materials to fill it, another cycle exists between representation and social processes (Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction").

The subordinate woman, who is also servant, and martyr, has roots in religious themes and has been painted in a way which continues to reinforce the status quo. The roles which women play throughout Western art history often fall within these definitions. Understanding the origins of woman-as-martyr requires the critique of systems of representation that position women as "objects of masculine desire, fantasy, and hatred" (Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction").

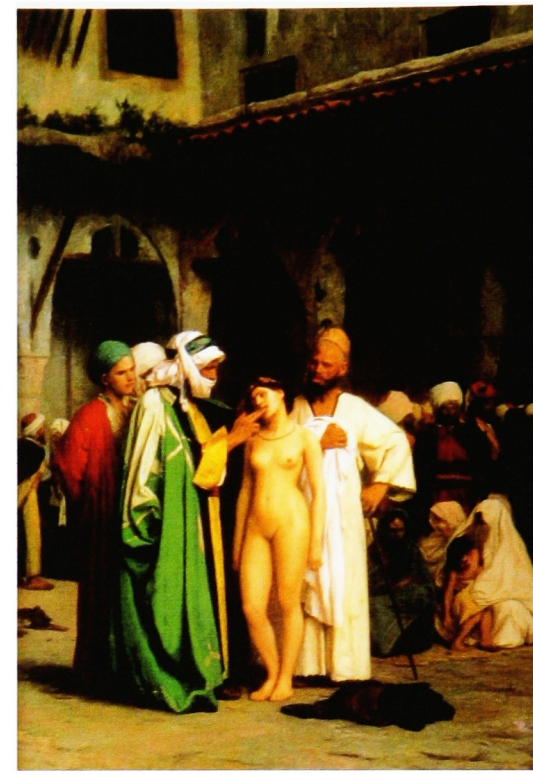

Figure 6. Jean-Léon Gérôme. ***Oriental Slave Market*****, reprinted from** ***www.orientalist –art.org***

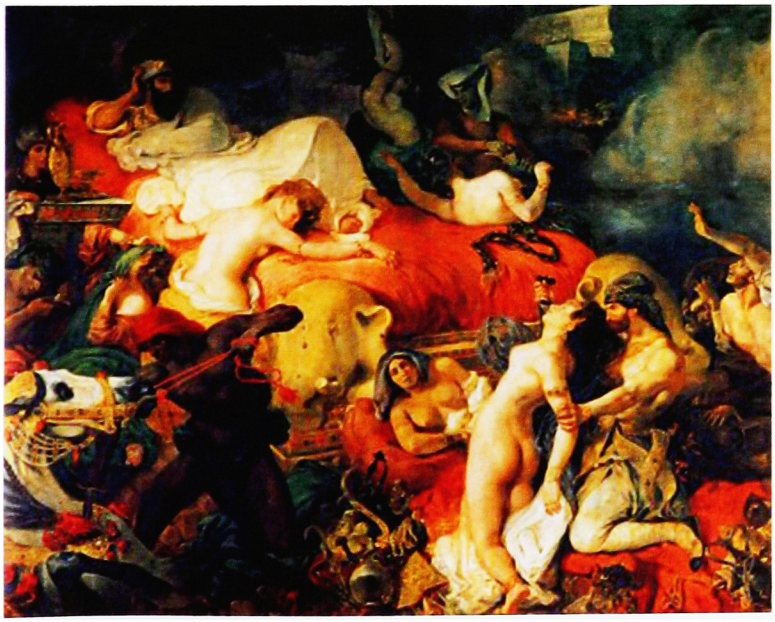

Figure 7. Eugene Delacroix. ***The Death of Sardanapalus*****, reprinted from** ***www.mystudios.com***

A long history exists of visual representations of women lacking power, or men as different from and superior to women. Nochlin points out some strong examples of these depictions in some of the best-

Figure 8. Sir Joseph Noel Paton. *In Memoriam.* Engraving after the lost original painting, reprinted from *www.artrenewal.org*

known paintings in the art-historical canon – the stars of Art History 101. Women are imaged in various states of undress and submission, positioned as commodities (as in Gérôme's *Oriental Slave Market)*, objects of violence (Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus)*, are celebrated for their passive nature even if it results in their own deaths (Paton's *In Memoriam*), and possess an inherent weakness in opposition to masculine strength (David's *Oath of the Horatii*). When women are portrayed as possessing power, they are redefined as something other than women. Goya's series of etchings,"Disasters of War," contains an image of women fighting violently, yet they are renamed in the title, *And They are Like Wild Beasts* (Nochlin, "Women, Art, and Power").

Figure 9. Jacques-Louis David. *The Oath of the Horatii*, reprinted from Brookner, *Jacques-Louis David*, 81.

The fact that women are paired with suffering so often

in art underlines assumptions about the role of woman as naturally sacrificial. There is a pervasive association of femininity with death in representation (Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories").

Figure 10. Francisco Goya y Lucientes. *And They Are Like Wild Beasts.* Etching and aquatint, reprinted from *The Complete Etchings of Goya*, plate 5.

Historically, men have controlled the way that women are allowed to behave and also how they are allowed to be represented. The use of the female nude, in particular, turns the definition of her sexuality into a commodity. "Art history has served to rationalize that material base upon which patriarchy…rests: men's control over women's labor power, sexuality, and access to symbolic representation (Isaak)."

Though the conception of the cycle of representation and social processes requires that the former have basis in the constructed latter, one cannot simply say that these portrayals of women were based on an empirically observed femaleness. The values expressed in the paintings are not based solely on a perception of what women *are* but also on what women *ought to be*. This is borne out by the editing of women's bodies that takes place in the images. The pre-modern norm in Western art required a woman to

have a perfect complexion and a complete lack of hair anywhere but on her head (Brownmiller).

In keeping with the religious origins of their vocation, male artists developed moral reasons for painting women in the nude. *Vanitas* paintings depict women lying around naked looking at themselves in mirrors, apparently to condemn the women for vanity and teach a moral lesson to the onlooker (Gouma-Peterson). This works out well for the man viewing the painting. He can look at a naked woman with impunity though she cannot look at her own body without sinful implications. A system is created in which men look and women are looked at; a certain measure of power comes from being the one allowed to look.

Art history is replete with representations of violence against women, literally and more subtly, as the nude woman is stripped of humanity (Pollock, "The Female Hero and the Making of a Feminist Canon: Artemisia Gentileschi's Representations of Susanna and Judith"). The woman of canonical representation is clearly subordinate; she exists to serve the purposes of others. She does not look, she is looked at. She does not act, she is acted upon. The women who emerge as heroes from these depictions are saints and other martyrs; they achieve greatness by their ideal natures – service and sacrifice taken to the ultimate level.

Sacrifice can be defined in many ways. The phenomenon can pertain to actions of personal selflessness, but also to a spectrum of loss which includes death in many forms. The parallels between aspects of the Church and Family extend beyond hierarchical similarities and the fostering of martyrdom. We have a tendency to save objects that belong to the dead or our dead past, assigning them great importance –

infusing them with the aura of the sacred. Our family photo albums are filled with iconic representations of that past, each the record of a small death, a moment lost to time. Carol Mavor interprets Barthes' writings about photographs of his mother and her possessions by describing them as partial stand-ins for the absent woman, and the family album as "...torn by the sorrows of loss: lost childhoods, lost friends, lost relatives, lost memories, lost objects, lost newness (Mavor and Hawarden)."

By setting items apart in significance, whether physically or purely mentally, we facilitate a sacred process, the transformation of a thing unremarkable into a secular relic. Our basements, attics, and albums are storage for the sacrosanct.

The difference between an object and a secular relic is the difference between Pinocchio the wooden puppet and Pinocchio the real boy. When I put my baby teeth in a box, it was not as a sentimental record of a childhood process. I had seen that my parents (as I had dismissed the Tooth Fairy as "illogical" at an early age) gave increasing amounts of money to my brother with each successive tooth, and that my friends' parents were doing the same. I deduced that as I got older and my baby teeth were in shorter supply, they would be worth more money, so I squirreled them away to cash them in once they had appreciated in value. I rediscovered the stockpile as a teenager, and the significance was changed. When I had my wisdom teeth removed as an adult, I carefully stored them with the other teeth. I didn't realize what I was doing at the time, but my attitude was one of reverence.

A relic can be either something that belonged to someone sainted, or an actual hunk of that person – hair, bone, blood in a little vial. We say "I have my grandmother's hair," or "my father's eyes." Are my grandfather's pajamas, my brother's pocketknife,

and the slope of my nose then not all artifacts of those passed? Positioned as the last member of my family line, I am both the physical repository of genetic attributes and hopes in some ultimate way. Am I then a reliquary?

As I considered these questions, I spent a great deal of time looking at my own family images. Discussion of a photograph's punctum – its power to both draw and repel, is something I strive for in my work but is innate in the family photograph as described by Roland Barthes (Hirsch). It is phenomenal what these photographs evoke; I start to remember things, events based on a particular t-shirt or wallpaper pattern. Some of these pictures I hadn't seen in a long time, or ever, and seeing old places I have lived, moments of which I had no idea a document existed – that time my Grandmother helped me clean out my closet, the gerbil cage in the background that once held Brownie and Superfoot, "… authenticates the reality of the past and provides a material connection to it" without doubt (Hirsch). Yes, this happened, and here is my visual for the abstract memory, and here – I can hold it in my hand and remember. The photograph is a way to save the imprint of a four-dimensional experience, but also a reminder that the recorded no longer exists. "Photography's relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability (Hirsch)." It seems both curse and gift – further evidence of punctum.

The family photograph is iconic in its incompleteness. We tend to put our best faces toward the lens, the revisionist history of lives comprised of vacations and birthday parties. Our interpretations of photographs can also change them contextually, further blurring the veracity of the represented through the filter of our histories. All history

writing, whether of Art or personal experiences, is formed in the present (Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories").

My recontextualization of my family photographs accomplishes overtly what we feel privately. We respond to photographs in a way that cannot be fully accounted for by their fragility – it extends to the fragility of the bodies within them. Mavor sees tearing or cutting photographs as a "hysterical action." When she saw that a friend's father had cut her mother out of every photograph in his album, including the wedding pictures, she described the action as "absolute violence!" (Mavor and Hawarden).

I had a similar experience when looking through albums that had belonged to my grandfather. The albums his mother had made were devoid of pictures of my grandmother. He is a growing child and a young man surrounded by others, but only a few pictures are present of him as an adult, and in them he is alone. Though photographs of my grandfather with my grandmother abound in my mother's albums, she does not exist in the life recorded by his mother. Likewise, all traces of my grandfather's mother are torn from the albums my mother has inherited. Furious with her daughter-in-law, she came into my

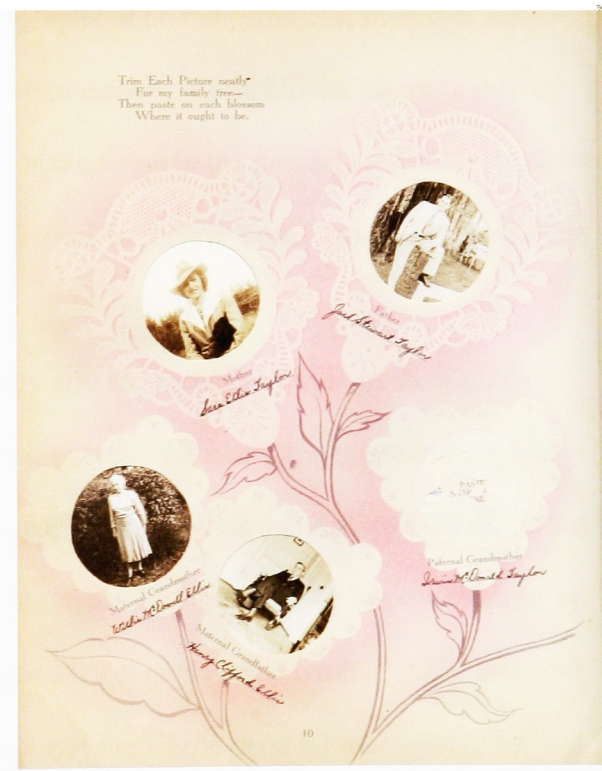

Figure 11. Ripped baby book page

grandmother's home and tore herself out of every album, box, and frame she could find. She was so enraged at the woman who held the images; she was unable to stand the idea that she would possess her likeness. Above the caption "paternal grandmother" in my mother's baby book is an incomplete circle of glue and torn paper.

When I learned that the picture's removal was intentional, I remember feeling a physical reaction to such brutality. The visceral reaction I have to the destruction of an image is greatly increased if the subject has died, which serves to outline the extent to which the likeness stands in for the departed. The photograph "functions as a space between life and death (Mavor and Hawarden)."

We rarely save or even take photographs of bad experiences; therefore our snapshots serve as our memory at its most dissociative. Lorie Novak suggests that we long for "a way of telling the past that will make sense in the present we know, we strive to organize these traces, to fill in the gaps (Novak and New York University. Center for Advanced Technology.)."

The fact that some of us intentionally edit the record of our lives through the alteration of photographs is evidence of their power. We photograph one incomplete version of history, and if our context changes, we may revise that history further. What is not pictured can be as or more important than what is. How will we be remembered by those who view our pictures after we are gone? Reynolds Price wrote, "…my face and body…will survive as a highly edited version of the whole person I managed to be behind an ever-ready grin (Mann)."

Family rituals are one of those things that we all seem to have in one form or another – some similar, some more unique. Barthes describes the family photo as a way

to chronicle family rituals while also being an objective of them (Hirsch). How many birthday cakes have we paused over, waiting for the photographer to say, "blow?" The pictures of my family are filled with Christmases, Thanksgivings, birthdays, and first days of school in successive falls. Though a family might spend less time together than apart, family pictures often depict a finite set of Scenes of Togetherness, assuming "the mask of the familial" (Mavor and Hawarden).

Figure 12. The author as a child with her mother and brother

The family photograph serves to outline and perpetuate particular structures and behaviors within the group it depicts. The "hegemonic familial ideology" that influences the way we relate to one another within a family, our expectations of and behavior toward one another, has been described as having a power that photography can tap (Hirsch). Identities within the family are constructed in relation to others within it. We become self and other at the same time in the context of the unit and in relation to the visual image.

Though we recognize ourselves, we also see the moments between the clicks of the shutter. Even we cannot measure up to our own canon, the perfection of our sainted selves emulsified. These photographs are the ultimate illustration of the construct of Family that I strive to represent in my work. The reasons Griselda Pollock gives to

reexamine art history also apply to the reexamination of the family photograph, "...making visible the mechanisms of male power, the social constructions of sexual difference and the role of cultural representations in that construction (Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction")." Biological reality defines the family, but the Family is evidenced in the myth of the conflict-free existence that family photographs suggest (Novak and New York University. Center for Advanced Technology.).

The extent to which stereotypic roles are reinforced in our visual records is indicated by the hierarchical orientation of persons by title in a family portrait, particularly a formal one. I once worked in a portrait studio for which I was required to take a set of portraits of a family oriented in particular ways. I was given a study booklet with examples of smiling parents and children. Also included were layouts with outlines eerily reminiscent of chalk lines, labels floating in their empty chests: Father, Mother, Oldest, Youngest, Girl, Boy, Baby. Every family portrait looked like every other; the differences were whether or not the Baby looked like it had been crying, if we could get the Girl and the Boy to look at the camera at the same time.

A striking feature of these archetypal poses speaks to the family photograph's reinforcement of the Familial pecking order. The only arrangement that did not position a woman as physically lower than a man required her to stand behind his seated figure with her hands on his shoulders, his hands on his own knee. These photographic arrangements represent visually the social constructions that make up the larger construction of Family. Even the prototypes for single portraits are designed differently. The poses for men are straight-backed with a vertically oriented head, and even if a

man's body is pointed away from the camera, his eyes usually look into the lens. Poses for women often involve a head-tilt, leaning onto a cloth-covered support, or looking off-camera. The poses for Woman are suggestive of the way women often speak, an unfixed, paratactic way of communicating from the subject position (Isaak).

Though modern, professional family portraits are increasingly diverse, the traditional style is still widely used. I can look through pictures my family had taken and deconstruct how the poses outline my father's masculinity and my mother's femininity. Femininity, while not biologically essential, is essential to the perpetuation of sexual difference, and therefore necessary to preserve the construct of Family (Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories").

We often take on differential postures in our snapshots as well, even when a photographer isn't directing us. The candid photos in my family albums catch us in a variety of attitudes, but I can pick out the same little-girl poses in every generation – the difference being that the camera was looking. This is one of the fundamental laws of scientific empiricism; the act of observing changes the observed. Lorie Novak encountered the same trend when cataloging countless photographs for her *Collected Visions* project, "…the differences in how girls and women present themselves in family photographs from the 1950s and 1960s as compared to the 1980s and 1990s are far less apparent than I expected, given the changes in women's roles and the influence of feminism over this forty-year period" (Novak and New York University. Center for Advanced Technology.). I had assumed that my childhood self wouldn't have succumbed to such posturing. I would only put on a dress under extreme duress and had

as many toys that were designed for boys as I did for girls. I was feeling quite smug as I created a pile of pictures of a straight-backed little me, but found a few startling records of me standing in a group of other little girls. Surrounded by the Girl Scouts, my little head cocked to the side like that of every little girl that bounced into the photo studio.

The percentage of photographs within my family's albums which contain my father is a significantly small number. Even prior to my brother's death or the dissolution of my parent's marriage (as both times were not particularly photogenic) my father is left out of most of the images. The resulting phenomenon is not the lack of presence caused by the intentional, physical excising of a former spouse. He is present in almost every image, because he is the Photographer. When the viewer sees a picture of us looking at the camera, they see us looking at him, reacting to him.

Looking implies power, but who in the family is doing the looking? Is it a phenomenon that exists in the same manifestation within the image and in the relationships of a family when unobserved by the camera? "The conventions of family photography, with its mutuality of confirming looks that construct a set of familial roles and hierarchies, reinforce the power of the notion of 'family' (Hirsch)." The stereotypic roles affect how much we are the actors and how much we are acted upon, which can be picked up on through visual cues in family photos. Can one read the language of the familial gaze? Perhaps it is possible to infer more from looks between family members than those exchanged with the photographer (Hirsch).

The more I revisit the same family photographs, the more I am interested in interpreting the gaze. If I put photographs of my parents together in chronological order, I can watch the look of love between them disappear. At the same time, nothing, not

even my own memory, proves to me that they loved each other the way the early images do. I find that the in-between moments which are missing from the album narrative can be partially restored through the reading of the space between the subjects/objects in the image.

Of course, all interpretations must be filtered through the photographer's gaze, the presence of the camera, and one's own memories and biases. There is no easy access to these nonverbal exchanges. The public myth of "Family" and the personal experience sometimes operate together, and are sometimes at odds. Jo Spence and Patricia Holland point out how family photographs can operate at the junction of myth and the personal unconscious, which is part of the power they carry (Hirsch). It is also the very thing that creates conflict within me when I view them.

Those I have referenced are, in their writings, particularly interested in exploring the role of the family photograph in the post-modern context, hoping that the examination of the visual will help to break down hierarchical, problematic power structures within the family. I feel at the very least that this kind of attention to these images validates their importance and can facilitate positive changes in those who choose to go back and revisit their own histories.

So what happens if we all decide to change the way we are pictured and self-define? Can we exist without martyrs? A certain amount of selflessness is necessary in order to maintain a society. After all, each generation requires a certain investment from the previous one, and it is quite possible that each of us will experience another time in our lives in which we require the assistance of others. The difference between what those

situations require and the definition of secular martyrdom is that the martyr is chiefly defined by sacrificial acts. Her life is principally one of service and self-denial.

We operate within a complex system which has defined sacrificial roles. Convergent histories position women in situations where they are celebrated for those roles, a process by which they are reinforced. It is possible, then, for a woman operating within a family structure to develop a self-concept, self-definition as sacrificial – if the role is too painful, perhaps one has not excelled. When one sees ones life as a supporting role as pictured in Art (pertaining to both models and women who make art) and Family media (the Father typically doing the looking and the hierarchical placement of the formal portrait). How does one achieve fulfillment?

I am at my most fulfilled when engaged in the process of artmaking, but it isn't a clear path. I do not discount the artists who are women who produce important work in a modern context, or those who first pointed out these inequities. In fact, I draw upon them deeply in the production of my concepts. At the same time, I feel the pull of the past. My first exposures to art history fit the mold that produces the art-saint, and the women in my family tend to be martyrs, even those who achieve great success outside the home. This is a difficult pattern to escape.

This struggle is one of the main themes of *Cultus*. As I began to conceive of a project which would create a space between the Family, the Church, and Art, I chose to don the mantle of martyrdom intentionally in order to highlight the pattern of its inheritance. I attempted to enter into the role deliberately, examining the processes by which secular saints are created, both in terms of the world of Art and the sainted mother of the private sphere. I was interested in developing a voice that originated somewhere

between a sense of subordination and the desire to escape it, between the personal and that which can be generalized.

With roots in the traditional South, the history of my family is one that casts women in lives of virtuous service, evaluating them in terms of that performance – candidates for secular sainthood. Sacrifice is a recurring theme in my family's past, including the death of my brother at the age of twelve. My own family imagery seems fitting source material for this work as my mother and brother become Madonna and child, my father becomes the Father, and relatives reach back into history in the iconographic style of religious hierarchy.

Figure 13. Simon Ushakov. *Planting the Tree of Russian Sovereignty*, reprinted from Onasch and Schneiper, *Icons*, 91.

I studied images of Russian Orthodox iconography and my own family images, wanting to emphasize the relationship visually by blending the two. I was particularly drawn to the work *Planting the Tree of Russian Sovereignty* from the school of Simon Ushakov, both aesthetically and contextually. The painting represents the Stroganoff school during a period when some of the most elaborate ornamentation was developed (Onasch and Schnieper).

I felt Ushakov's painting was perfect prototypically as it also literally represented a hierarchical system. After making this decision, I

discovered a page in my mother's baby book that bore striking similarities to the Russian painting.

The family tree I found there became the source for much of the imagery in the center panel of the *Cultus* altarpiece.

Figure 14. Baby book page

I had identified the concepts I wanted to explore, and I had found an archetypal image to use as a model in order to portray those concepts. The difficulty lay in producing something with my hands that looked like what I saw in my mind.

I decided to use fabric as the main material for the pieces after much thought. Fabric is desirable because it is lighter weight than other materials I considered, and it seemed the perfect medium to reference craft and domesticity. I tried a variety of methods by which to assemble the parts of the panels, and discovered a look that I liked by ironing fabrics together with a double-sided fusible web designed for creating seams and attaching appliqués. I could create a smooth surface by stretching the background fabric onto frames and ironing the other components onto that surface. Next, I had to figure out the best way to construct those components.

I began by focusing on the medallions containing portraits, as I wanted to correlate my family tree with the Tree of Russian Sovereignty in Ushakov's painting. I chose to make my portraits headshots as opposed to the wider view used in the original to show the faces in greater detail and to reference the more modern photographic portrait. I tried many combinations of printing processes before arriving at the desired look. Ultimately, I used a method for producing large format digital negatives that I had developed while working on previous projects. After scanning my own family images and adjusting them in Photoshop, I was able to use an Epson printer to produce digital negatives on transparent film. I could then use the negatives to contact-print images onto fabric treated with Van Dyke Brown chemistry and exposed to ultra-violet light. I constructed an ultra-violet exposure unit in order to control all aspects of exposure to produce predictable results. I could use a variety of source materials: photographic prints, negatives, slides, or images taken digitally, and print them so that their differing origins were not apparent.

Figure 15. Cultus altarpiece: center panel

I also attempted a variety of painting and dying techniques to add color to the fabric images. During the heyday of Russian Icon painting, individuals specialized in painting particular aspects of the icons. One person would work as a painter of faces and

hands, and another person would come after and paint in the clothes. Sometimes a number of specialists would be employed to produce a single icon. Due to this practice, the styles of flesh-painting and fabric-painting developed somewhat independently, and there is often a visual disconnect between parts of these works (Onasch and Schnieper). By printing the faces and hands of my family members first, then painting clothes on them with brightly-colored fabric paint, I was able to mimic the dichotomy of styles. I used the same techniques to turn my mother and infant brother into the Madonna and Child and a photograph I took of my father specifically for the project into an image of God the Father.

I also printed other elements onto fabric: the house where my mother grew up and lengths of picket fence, then painted over them. These pieces replaced the church and wall of the Ushakov painting, altering the proportions of the components of my prototype in order to draw the viewer's attention to the importance of each part. I found cloud and grass-patterned fabrics in a craft store, ironed them onto fusible web, and cut them into the desired shapes. The roses and vines originated from a very complex printed pattern that I meticulously scissored.

The side panels of the altarpiece are also constructed based on particular styles of representation. The start-and-stop narrative of a life that is created through the photographic process is reminiscent of a particular style of iconographic painting. The hagiology (or vita) icon portrays a saint in the center, surrounded by scenes from his or her life. The scenes depict important moments, such as the calling of the saint, miracles (s)he performed, and scenes from the saint's death if (s)he was martyred (Onasch and Schnieper). Both are "greatest-hits" versions of complex lives.

I wanted to include typical subjects for the hagiology scenes, so I selected photographs taken during special events, holidays, or vacations to print onto fabric. My mother and I are positioned as saints on either side of the altarpiece, surrounded by scenes from our lives as saints were depicted, the milestones we commemorate in photographs. My mother is pictured on the left panel of the altarpiece. Many of the scenes from her life show her acting in service of her family – cooking, taking care of children. In the center, she holds her hands in the iconic attitude of acceptance (Hall).

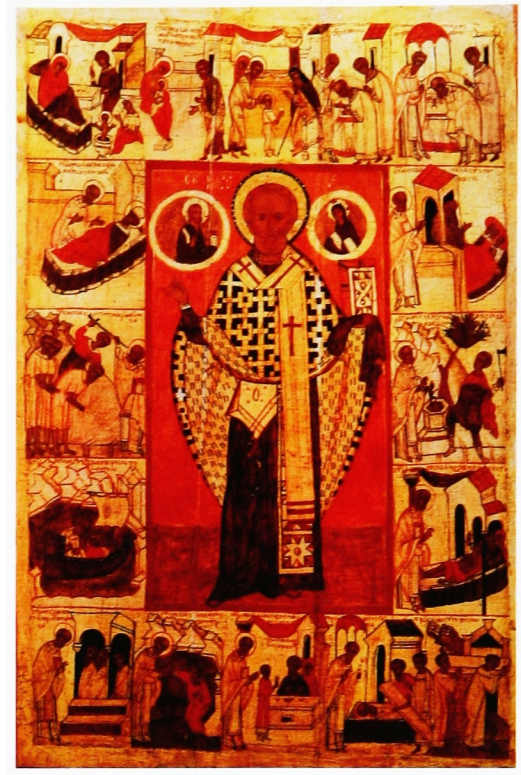

Figure 16. Russian, fourteenth or fifteenth century, *Saint Nicholas*, reprinted from *Icons*. 204.

Figure 17. *Cultus* altarpiece: left panel

My figure, which stands opposite, holds in her hands evidence of the mechanisms by which the art saint is created. It is my intention to point them out, but at the same time I hold them – they are part of my makeup. Just as I am the inheritor, the reliquary, of genetic traits, I am the bearer of histories. The thumbscrew my figure is wearing in the altarpiece is a reference to Gentileschi. In the other hand, she holds eyeballs on a plate. This is an

iconographic attitude of St. Lucy, a woman who is celebrated for giving up her vision in a literal way. When a man was drawn to her because of her beautiful eyes, she cut them out lest she cause him harm (Ferguson). St. Lucy stands as a perfect metaphor for women's subjugated vision. She is the patron saint of photography, paradoxically, further outlining the relationships between histories.

Figure 18. *Cultus* altarpiece: right panel

The present is the watershed moment. In the center of our panels, my mother and I appear at roughly the same age. She is surrounded by images of herself spanning time from that age to the present; I am surrounded by images of myself from infancy to the common age, which is my present. We are dressed similarly, in martyr's robes. The stylistic disconnect between the clothing and other components is accomplished by printing the face, hands, and objects onto cloth using the Van Dyke process and sewing three-dimensional robes from opulent fabrics.

Figure 19. Scouting Relics

I strove to represent the phenomenon of the secular relic on the *Cultus* altar, repositioning personally significant items as relics, displayed in ornamented boxes under glass. I included possessions of those passed: my brother's scouting badges and pocketknife, the pajamas I took from my grandfather's house when he died, as well as my own teeth and hair. The fact that my hair is red makes it particularly representative of genetic inheritance.

Figure 20. Pajama Relic

Figure 21. Modern Orthodox Altar, reprinted from Pocknee, *The Christian Altar*, 97.

The altar itself is constructed and draped with an altar cloth and covers I made in a modern orthodox style (Pocknee).

Just as objects which exist in photographs can take on shades of the sacred, photographs themselves can be relics or icons. I placed icons made from portraits of my father,

mother, and brother on the altar, recontextualizing the images by transferring them to fabric (using iron-on techniques designed for making t-shirts) embellishing them with gold stitching and surrounding them with ornate frames.

I did not choose the image of my brother in the hospital because it is a typical family photo but because it is not. When I came across that particular image, I was struck by how the subject of suffering and even my brother's posture mimicked that of martyrs in images I had seen.

Figure22. Brother Icon and Hair Relic

Figure 23. Mother and Father Icons and Teeth Relic

I combined the altar and altarpiece with other elements: the candelabras, chandelier, and doors, to further define a hallowed space, a place to meditate on these relationships of histories and meanings.

These are the sacred stories of our lives, and on some level, we know it. The recent fad of scrap booking and the resulting aisles of acid-free stickers and scalloped-

edged scissors mark the advent of the new illuminated manuscript. The concept of adding to and repositioning images in order to guide the viewer through the story is another form of editing, one that I wanted to perform intentionally.

The Church, the Family, and Art are inextricably linked as part of a complex web of social processes. In both the visual and written components of *cultus*, I have endeavored to expose how each facilitates the production of sainted figures and sacred objects. The Biblical saint has much in common with the conventional Mother and the exceptional "woman artist" of canonized Art History, and similarities exist between relics of saints, the photographs and objects we save, and artwork defined as a product of "genius". The phenomena of sacrifice and the sacred permeate our lives, particularly as they relate to the experiences of women. In each system, the women who are most celebrated are those who have made the greatest sacrifices.

I have struggled with my own role within this web of histories and processes. I am not necessarily better or stronger than the women who have come before me, so how do I presume that I will be able to accomplish something different from this point? I see it as my responsibility to take advantage of changing times and to continue that change. The re-conception of art as process makes it possible for me to use it as a tool of discovery. Art is perhaps one of the most important and powerful tools in the modern context of pervasive visual imagery. Art is the witness to the process of change (Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories").

The way that we relate to the objects and images we keep is evidence that we are, on some level, aware of the sacred in the everyday. Perhaps the same drives that create

religious objects cause us to attach great significance to secular ones; they both represent something that we want to claim for ourselves – a greater history, a greater power. A relic is a bridge to what we desire. If we are reliquaries, we contain that passage within ourselves.

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